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AIRGRAM

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 October 1978
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DATE: December 15, 1978

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(U) SUMMARY. There were 32 killings possibly attributable to political motives in October. In addition, as many as 25 persons died and 300 were wounded in the bus fare protests. If the 13 apparent victims of the so-called "death squads" are included, October can be recorded as the most violent month of 1978.

A number of leftists were shot, shot at or threatened, including the President of the San Carlos University students' association (AEU). The dead student appeared in a "hit" list disseminated by the rightist Secret Anti-Communist Army (ESA). The EGP (Guerrilla Army of the Poor) took over two villages, killing two policemen, and demonstrating again their ability to carry out his kind of activity with impunity.

This was the month the government moved to suppress some of the public sector labor organizations. It was in October that the Embassy received a complaint from an American citizen of mistreatment while imprisoned. At the UN, the Foreign Minister reaffirmed Guatemalan support for human rights, but free of "political and ideological distortions." END SUMMARY.

(C) GOVERNMENT-RELATED VIOLENCE. On September 14 police arrested American citizen [redacted] who at the time was riding with acquaintances in what turned out to be a stolen car.

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE A/CDC/MR
 REVIEWED BY [signature] DATE 2 OCT 1978
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The bus fare increase protest and its aftermath occupied popular attention during most of October. In the opening days of the month following an announcement that the Guatemalan City Council had granted, with GOG approval, a fare increase to bus owners -- thus raising the fare from five to ten cents -- sporadic demonstrations broke out in various parts of the city. To some extent the protests were engineered by university student and labor groups, but soon the youthful exuberance of secondary students, perhaps inspired by TV coverage of Nicaragua street fighting, and the inflamed tempers of the inhabitants of the "earthquake resettlement" areas carried the protests to the level of riots. Looting followed. Details of the events are reported in Guatemala 5792, 5848, 5874, 5913, 5952, 5989, 6039, 6073, 6231 and 6686.

During the ten days of protests there were reportedly as many as 25 deaths and 300 persons wounded; 800 or more persons were arrested. (All were subsequently released, some provisionally.) Riot police mainly used tear gas and clubs to contain protesters. The police at first denied they carried weapons although some policemen were photographed with pistols and rifles. (The press corps complained a number of times of police interference with reporters and photographers trying to cover the demonstrations.)

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Killed and injured included innocent bystanders, minors and firemen (trying to quench ignited buses), as well as rescue workers. The Guatemalan Red Cross reported treating 300 cases of bullet wounds.

As tension mounted, the likelihood of a state of siege appeared imminent. However, the national government, tired of waiting for the city government to resolve the issue, announced a subsidy for the bus owners and soon buses were rolling again. The government announced the cause for the strike at end. However, public employee "association" leaders (unions for most government workers are illegal) continued the strike for other reasons. As a consequence, the government moved severely against the associations. Initially it closed the offices of the telegraph (ATRG) and postal (ANCEP) workers associations; ultimately it withdrew their legal status. (The legality of this action is under challenge before the courts.) Hundreds of workers were arrested and many strike leaders were fired.

Later, some arrested union leaders charged that they had been beaten by the police. Others complained to press or to Embassy officials that they were being hunted by police and that they feared for their lives.

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In Quezaltenango, according to press reports, police shot and killed two university students in connection with sympathy demonstrations related to the Guatemala City bus fare protests. San Carlos University protested the arrest and torture of students arrested in Solola, one of whom had to be hospitalized. The Social Security workers union (STIGGS) complained about the seizure of three workers by armed men at a hospital in Guatemala City. They charged the police with holding the workers and filed habeas corpus writs which were not successful since the police publicly denied knowledge of the workers.

The CNT and CNUS labor confederations protested the deaths of labor leaders Gonzalo AC Bin of the ACRICASA (plastics factory) union and Miguel Angel ORDONEZ of the CAVISA (glass factory) union. According to CNT/CNUS, the workers on the bus on which the two leaders were riding were told to get out by police, who had stopped the bus near the outskirts of town near the University of San Carlos. CNT/CNUS claim the police began firing "for no reason" killing Ac and Ordóñez. (Comment: The press never carried the police version of the account, nor apparently has CNT/CNUS pursued legal action against the police unit which they maintained they had identified.)

(C) GUERRILLA-RELATED VIOLENCE. (Leftist groups) On October 6 some 12-15 guerrillas took over the village of Fraijanes, 35 kms from the capital. Three women were reported to be among the group and one was believed to be its leader. Typically, they addressed the townspeople, painted signs (EGP), set fires, and departed shooting, killing two policemen and wounding one. The next day the EGP issued a bulletin taking responsibility for the act (Guatemala 5989).

About 40 guerrillas, believed to be members of the EGP, took over the village of San Ramón near Barillas in the troubled Ixcán area of Huehuetenango, urging campesinos to join them in fighting the government and distributing leaflets. The Ministry of Government later denied the event took place. According to the press there are no police at San Ramón. In Guatemala City, police announced the capture of three persons attempting to hang up an EGP banner. In Escuintla, a policeman was seriously injured when he tried to remove a PGT banner which was booby-trapped with a grenade. Three persons alleged to belong to the PGT were seized by police in Suchitepéquez for setting off a "propaganda bomb" on the government-owned farm "Chocolá."

(C) RIGHT-WING TERRORISM. University student leader Oliverio CASTAREDA was shot down near the central plaza of Guatemala City following a Revolution Day ceremony (Guatemala 6243). Although in full sight of many witnesses and with police units nearby, the killers calmly carried out the assassination and made good their escape. Castañeda is the only person on the ESA "hit" list to die so far (Guatemala 6426). (Note: The brothers killed in San Marcos (Guatemala 6426) who were believed to be the "brothers Fuentes" on the list are rather the "brothers Cifuentes." Their parents speculated to the press that the two were mistaken for plain clothes policemen and killed in error.)

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Israel MARQUEZ, Secretary General of the CNT labor confederation escaped being shot when his truck was machine-gunned in front of his home on October 16. Marquez is also on the ESA list.

Castañeda's death and the appearance of the ESA list has caused widespread concern. Amnesty International called on the Guatemalan government to provide protection for those on the list. The President's Press Secretary said later that the government's offer to provide protection to those on the list had gotten no takers. (According to one paper, he also indicated that the government would be receptive to visits by international human rights groups.) However, El Gráfico, one of the several media offices machine-gunned in October by unknown persons, did ask that government security forces be assigned to protect the premises.

Vice President VILLAGRAN KRAMER asked the Minister of Government to fully investigate Castañeda's death and that the guilty be punished regardless of their position or "immunity." Villagrán said that while government involvement could not be excluded, he did not personally believe the government was involved. Rather, he tended to lay the blame with rightist organizations and made a case for involvement by rightist MLN forces.

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One paper pointedly commented that Manuel SAGASTUME Azurdia, whose name has appeared on ESA bulletins as its leader and about whom nothing else is known, shares his initials with former Guatemalan Vice President and leader of the National Liberation Movement (MLN) Mario SANDOVAL Alarcon.)

(U) OTHER VIOLENCE. Twenty armed men dressed in olive green took over the Finca (farm) Calcutta in Suchitepéquez Department threatening the administrator, setting fires, and searching for the owner (presumably to threaten or kill him).

An ex-president of the telegraphers union (ATRG) was killed outside his home by unknown persons. Press and labor leaders tended to view the killing as an act of intimidation, a warning for other labor officials. Some persons thought it might be a case of mistaken identity since the victim had not been active recently in union affairs (Guatemala 5989).

On October 17 Lic. Santiago LOPEZ Aguilar, university professor and labor lawyer, was shot and wounded as was a student riding with him. There has

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been no trace of his attackers who machine-gunned him from a motorcycle (Guatemala 6231).

Arnoldo Atenógenes DE LEON, male nurse with the Social Security Institute and Secretary General of the social security union in San Marcos, was kidnapped by armed men from the hospital in Malacatán, San Marcos, where he worked. Nothing has been heard from him since then.

Professor (teacher) Baudilio MORALES Monroy, President of the Suchitepéquez teacher association and official of CETE (the public employees union), escaped a kidnap attempt by hiding when various armed men broke into his home in Mazatenango and wrecked the house searching for him. Lic. Gober PORTILLO, Director of the University Center of Cuyotenango (Suchitepéquez), a branch of the University of San Carlos, had his house similarly ransacked when armed men searched for him in vain.

Armed men, termed "subversive elements" by the police, attacked a Mobile Military Policeman (PMA) guarding a Guatemala City bank. After killing the policeman, the attackers took his weapons and ID and fled. Two unknown persons attacked a police post outside Coatepeque, Quetzaltenango, with machine guns, wounding one of the policemen. Other unknown gunmen attacked the lone policeman at the fertilizer plant (FERTICA) in San Marcos while his three companions were attending a local fiesta. The attackers got away with four submachine guns and four olive drab uniforms.

(U) HUMAN RIGHTS ATMOSPHERICS. Foreign Minister CASTILLO VALDEZ' address to the UN General Assembly included extensive references to human rights, some of which follow:

One of the basic principles...of the Government of Guatemala... is to give full [force] to universally recognized human rights as well as to respect and guarantee [their exercise].

My government offers complete collaboration in order that their implementation and observance may be a live reality... For years Guatemala has supported the creation of the post of High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The present Guatemalan government believes that it is indispensable to introduce a profound change in the focus of human rights, in order to eliminate all vestige of political and ideological motives which often distort and impede the impartial judgment which they should inspire.

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Missing from September's report on human rights atmospherics was the inscription of a new political party, the PNR (Guatemala 5500). The Partido Nacional Renovador was required by the Electoral Registry to drop "Revolucionario" from its name -- it too closely resembled the PR, Partido Revolucionario. While this certification of a new party -- first since 1967 -- represents a considerable breakthrough, attention still focuses on the fate of Manuel COLON Argueta's leftist FUR. Two more parties, the FUN (formerly led by ex-presidential candidate Col. PERALTA Azurdia) and the CAN (tied to former President ARANA) must first be considered for certification.

(U) STATISTICS. Of the 32 deaths having political overtones, 17 were in Guatemala City, 7 each in the Oriente and Indian highlands, and 1 in Izabal. There were 13 deaths (all in the capital) believed to represent "death squad" activities.

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